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JUNE 16, 1974
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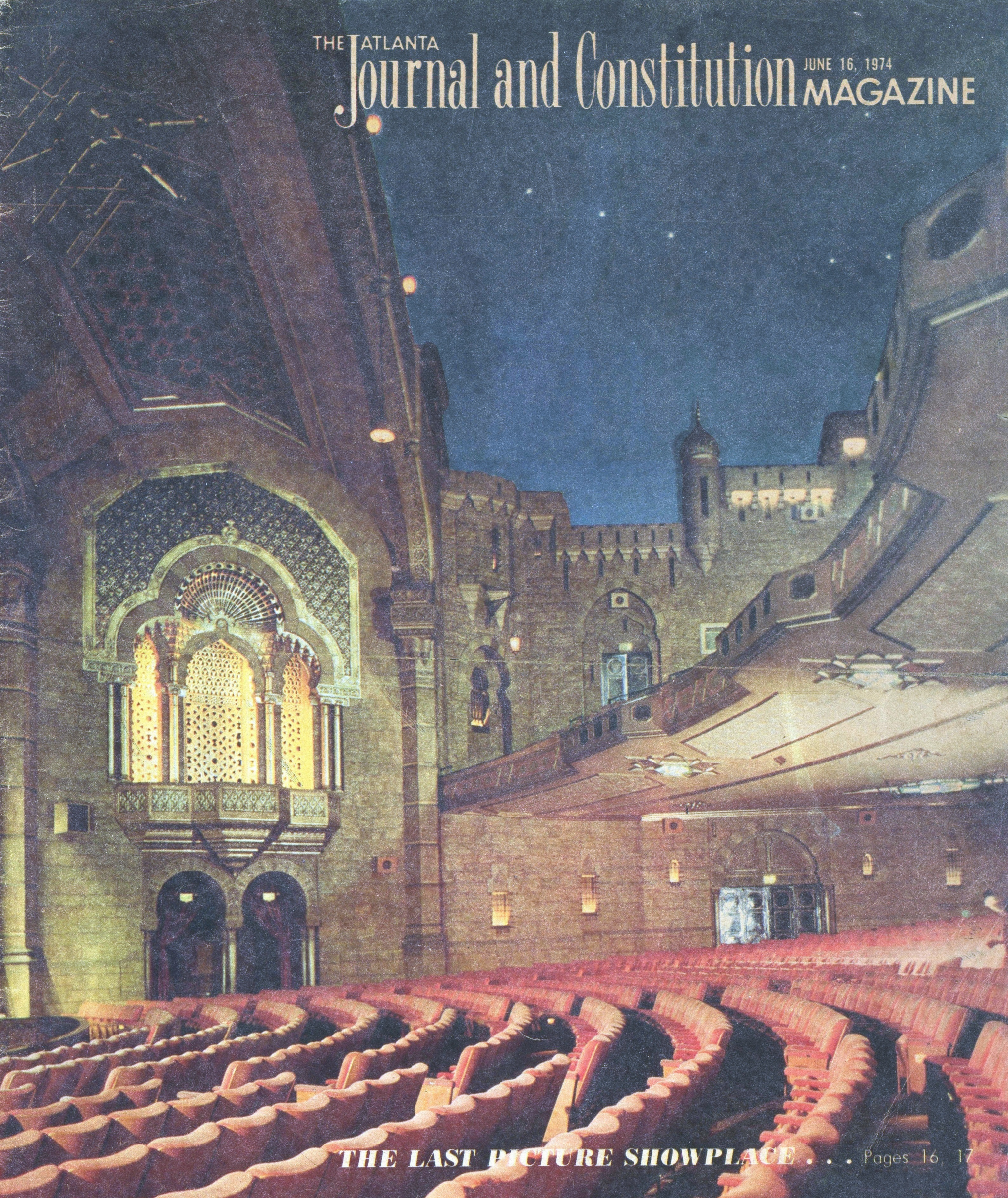

THE LAST PICTURE SHOWPLACE . . . Pages 16, 17

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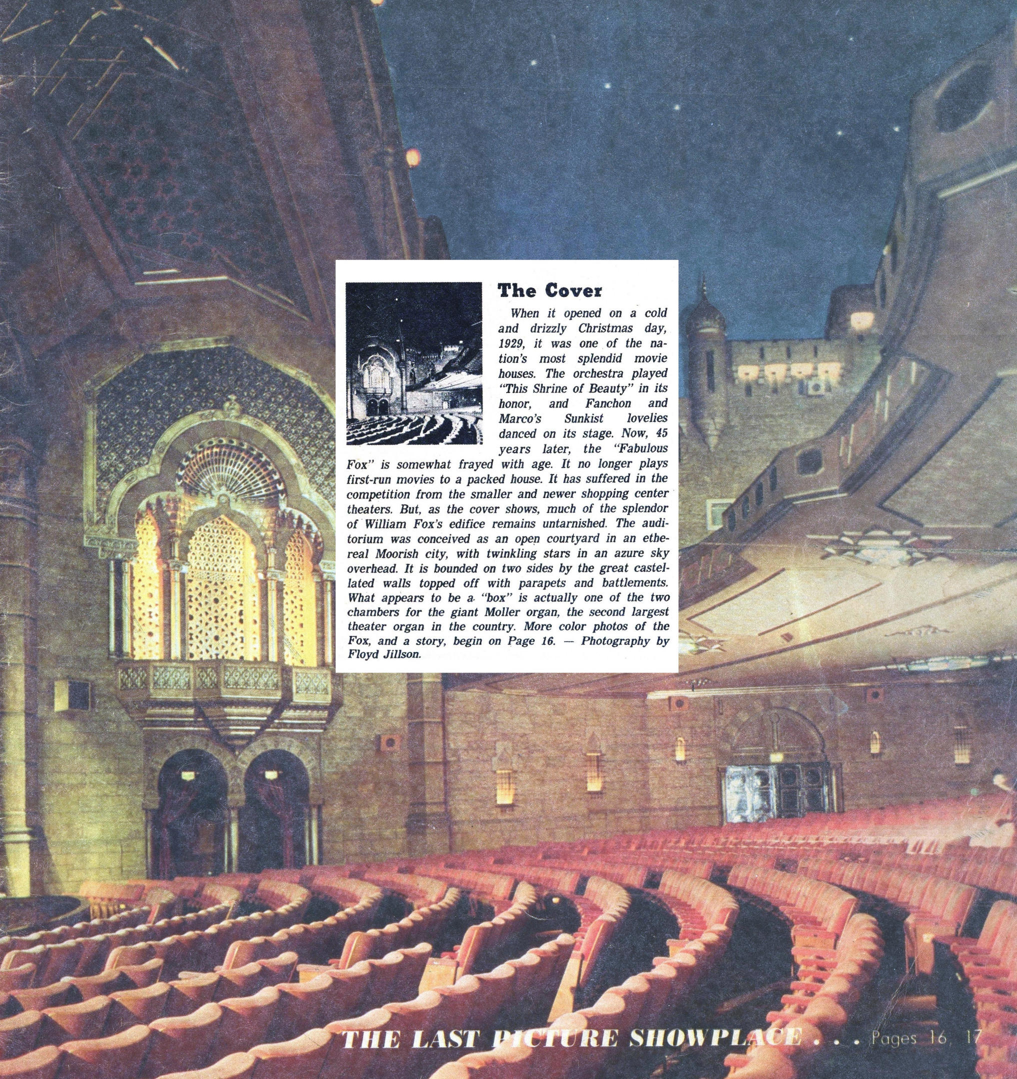
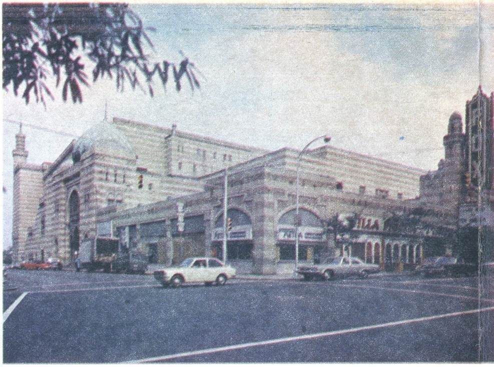


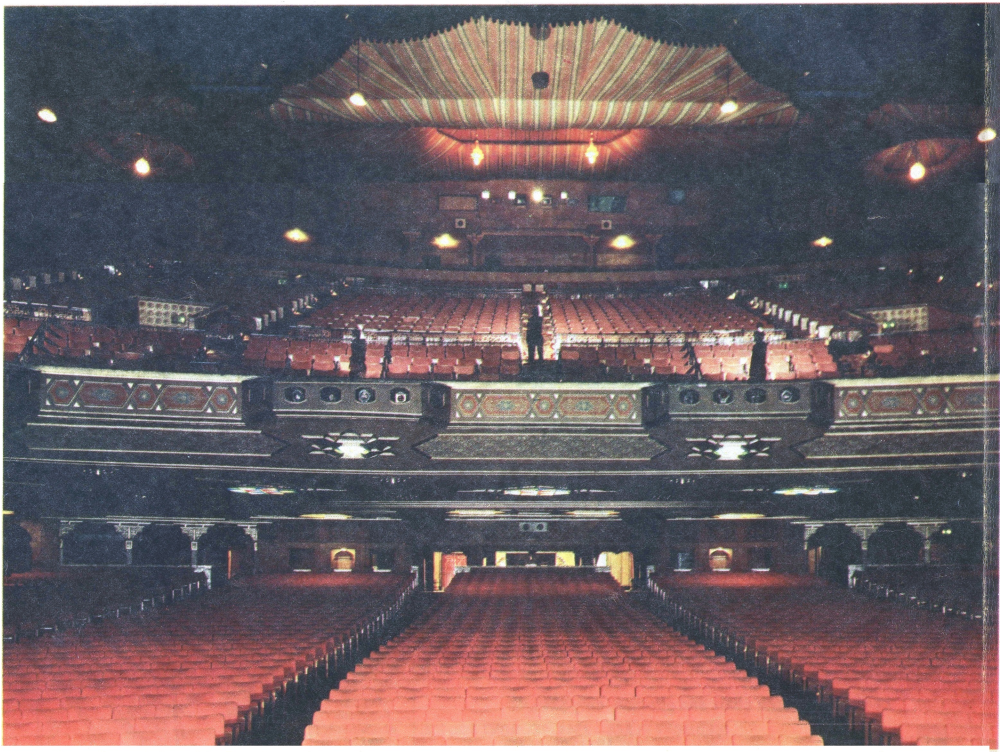
The Cover

When it opened on a cold and drizzly Christmas day, 1929, it was one of the nation's most splendid movie houses. The orchestra played "This Shrine of Beauty" in its honor, and Fanchon and Marco's Sunkist lovelies danced on its stage. Now, 45 years later, the "Fabulous Fox" is somewhat frayed with age. It no longer plays first-run movies to a packed house. It has suffered in the competition from the smaller and newer shopping center theaters. But, as the cover shows, much of the splendor of William Fox's edifice remains untarnished. The auditorium was conceived as an open courtyard in an ethereal Moorish city, with twinkling stars in an azure sky overhead. It is bounded on two sides by the great castellated walls topped off with parapets and battlements. What appears to be a "box" is actually one of the two chambers for the giant Moller organ, the second largest theater organ in the country. More color photos of the Fox, and a story, begin on Page 16. — Photography by Floyd Jillson.

THE LAST PICTURE SHOWPLACE . . . Pages 16, 17

A Fading Paradise on Peachtree Street





The performers' view of the Fox takes in the sweeping cantilevered balcony, the simulated Moorish tent above, and the azure sky overhead.

* * *

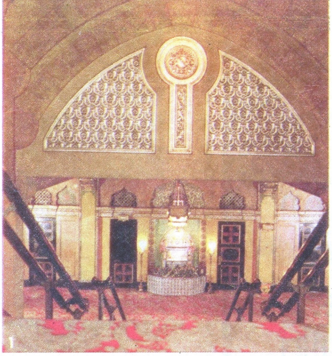
The fabulous Fox, a monument to an opulent era, is one of the last of the movie palaces

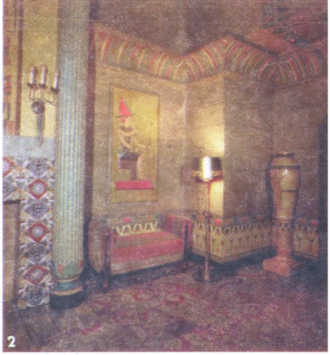
* * *

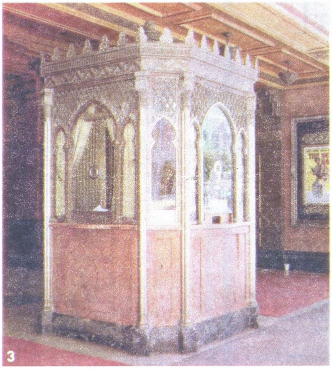
By Henry Woodhead

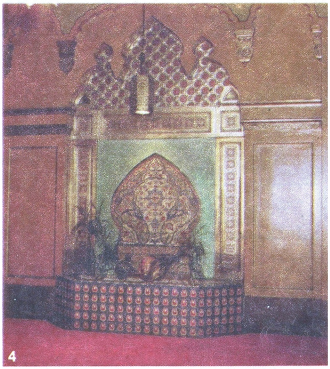
DURING a recent rock concert at the Fox Theater, a hired streaker fell into the organ pit while trying to negotiate a railing and broke about five keys off the massive console. She also managed to bust up the organist's stool. Somehow she accomplished all this without hurting herself. Within a couple of days after this incident, a short, slight, bustling man carrying a Polaroid camera photographed the damage and proceeded to fix it. His labors were voluntary and uncompensated. His name is Joe Patten, and he is one of a select handful of Atlanta people who could be called Fox groupies. The unreality of the Fox fascinates these people. They have been known to mend its damask curtains, to polish its brass fittings, to repaint its Levantine scrollwork. They revel in its fading splendor, and they fret over its dubious future.

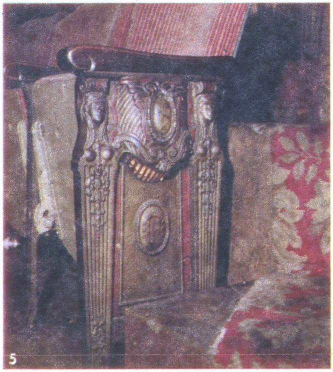
Joe Patten is a bachelor, an electrical engineer who sells X-ray equipment and who lives with an aging German shepherd in East Point, when he is not roaming about in the Fox. His infatuation with the theater started in 1963, when an esoteric outfit called the American Theater Organ Society put him in charge of restoring the theater's Moller pipe organ, which had been carrying dust for a few decades. Ten months later the job was done, and the few volunteers who had helped Patten put sound back in the Mighty Mo drifted away. But he kept coming back to the Fox. "This theater has always fascinated me," he said. "After I finished restoring the organ I *(Continued on Next Page)*

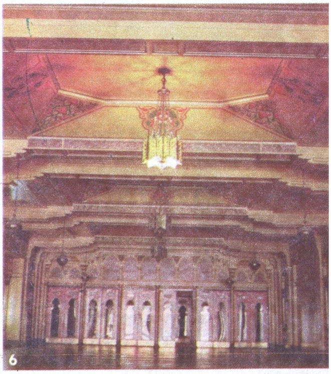












1. The lobby of the Fox is rich with grillwork and gold leaf. **2.** Many original furnishings, garnered from the Mideast, remain in the lounges. **3.** The box office is brass, made in France for the Fox. **4.** Schools of goldfish once swam in this tiled fountain. **5.** This intricate metal work is found on the original balcony seats. **6.** Filigreed lamps light the main entrance.

Photography by Floyd Jillson

The lancet-shaped arches in the lounge create a Moorish atmosphere.

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made a very intensive study of the building, and I came to love the thing very dearly.

"It is one of the last of the movie palaces," Patten said, sitting in the tiny room that serves him as an informal office backstage at the Fox.

"Its architecture is a combination of Moorish, Arabic and Egyptian, and it was designed in a very tasteful manner, not objectionable at all, like others of its kind. A person in here finds himself in some beautiful edifice that he would never go into except in the Near East. Of course, the idea back when they built it was to take a customer out of his ordinary life and put him in a world untroubled by reality."

Times have been hard on other depression-era extravaganzas such as the Fox; old movie palaces all over the country — the Roxy in New York, the Palace in Los Angeles, the San Francisco Fox — have fallen to the wrecking ball. According to periodic rumors, the Atlanta Fox is not far behind them. These rumors are always denied by management. But if the quality of the films shown at a theater is an index of its health, the Fox is one sick movie house. When the Metropolitan Opera opened in Atlanta at the Civic Center recently with Verdi's "I Vespri Siciliani," a double bill of sexplotation, "Caged Heat" and "The Hot Box," played at the Fox. The Fox had been the Met's Atlanta home for 18 years, until the Civic Center was erected.

AND the organ, the world's largest except for the one at the Mormon Tabernacle, is played only on special occasions now. "The Fox," said Patten, "is no longer playing the kind of movies at which an organ like this is appreciated."

Still, management claims that the box office at the Fox is in robust health. "Last year for the Fox was one of the best in recent times," George Deavours, its manager, said. "And business this year is stable. We think of the Fox as an entertainment center, rather than just a motion picture house."

What about the rumor that the lease on the Fox will not be renewed next year, Deavours was asked. "I've been here four-and-a-half years and that rumor crops up every couple of months. It's not true. I'd sure hate to be the one that had to tear it down. It's solid as a rock, a fantastic building."

THE night before the interview with Deavours, however, he was heard to say at a cocktail party: "The Fox is gotta go. There's no getting around it. The Fox is gonna go."

The Fox, topped off by an imposing onion dome, takes up a city block bounded by Peachtree Street and Ponce de Leon Avenue. It has had an erratic history. It was originally planned as a Shriners' mosque for members of the Yaarab Temple, but William Fox, the movie magnate, took the Shriners aside and talked them into expanding the design to include his pleasure dome. He would lease the theater; the Shriners could use it for their gatherings. No one knew the depression was coming, however. The Fox opened grandly in 1929, limped along for three years and was closed because of unpaid taxes. In 1935, the theater was reopened by a group called Mosque, Inc., which still owns it, although the principals of the company have changed over the years.

The design of the Fox is something architectural historians call Neo-Mideastern Eclectic, which means a mixture of Islamic and Egyptian and Arabic styles thrown together in a proliferation of minarets and arches, domes and towers. It was designed by a local firm, Marye, Alger and Vinour, but mostly by Vinour himself, who consulted a couple of picture books entitled "Nubia" and "The Holy Land" and some 50 postcards a friend of his brought back from a world tour.

It took a couple of years to build the Fox, and it cost about $4 million. A bevy of Swedes were imported from Ohio to plaster the walls. They used corn

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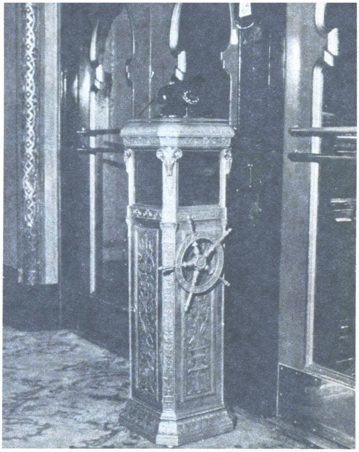
flakes in their plaster to get just the right effect. The painters poured sweet milk into the blue pigment that covers the ceiling. Some $35,000 worth of 14 karat gold was leafed into the walls. Meanwhile, Mrs. William Fox, like a housewife at a flea market, puttered about in the Levant, picking out lamps and sofas and urns and fabric for her husband's movie house.

INSIDE, the theater is a fading paradise. Watching a movie in the Fox is not nearly so interesting as looking at the Fox itself. The auditorium is a Moorish courtyard, bounded by castellated walls with parapets, battlements and balconies. The ceiling is an azure sky filled with twinkling stars and clouds that drift from wall to wall. "Even after all these years, after trips to the moon and television, people are still fascinated by the twinkling stars in our ceiling," Deavours remarked.

The box office is solid brass, made in France especially for the Fox. The ticket chopper is solid brass, made in Italy. There are terrazo fountains that once contained schools of goldfish but are now inoperative, because kids threw in trash.

Backstage, the Fox is a catacombs. Dressing rooms, rehearsal halls, a broadcast studio, another theater for previewing (where the censor once carefully watched). Dark and eerie corridors and empty rooms where a person could lose himself for days. At its nethermost level, far below the streets, where the giant air conditioner throbs out its coolness, a marksman of the past had set up a pistol range with a torso target. "There was a producer from Hollywood who spent a week roaming around here," Deavours said. "He was trying to find a place for a modern version of 'The Phantom of the Opera,' and he wanted to use the Fox. But he didn't want to give us anything for it, so it didn't work out."



The ticket chopper is solid brass, made in Italy.

If you caught the first show in the Fox Theater, opening night, Dec. 25, 1929, you would have seen the great organ console rise from the depths of the orchestra pit carrying a slip of a woman named Iris Vining Wilkins, who proceeded to play a medley of hits of the day. Lower Miss Wilkins. Then the Fox Grand Orchestra rose on its lift and, conducted by Enrico Leide, played "This Shrine of Beauty" by Elgar. Then a cartoon, "Steamboat Willie," the forerunner of Mickey Mouse. Then an audience "song fest." Then a stage

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show, featuring Fanchon and Marco's Sunkist Beauties in a routine called "Beach Nights."

Then the Fox Movietone News, and finally the main feature: "Salute," starring George O'Brien, Helen Chandler and Stepin Fetchit.

If you caught the show at the Fox last month, it would have been "Caged Heat" and "The Hot Box" and little else. It is unlikely that a promising first-run movie will ever start at the Fox again. Those knowlegeable about the movie industry explain that nowadays a theater must be able to guarantee a certain "run," say of 24 weeks, by a first-rate film before they can obtain it for showing. Under these circumstances, the Fox is simply too big. While most new theaters seat only 500 or so, the cavernous Fox can handle 3,934 viewers (its capacity before a seating renovation was 5,000). The greater the seating capacity of a theater, the shorter the life of a movie playing there. The Fox can no longer guarantee long runs of a popular movie, so they go to the tiny new suburban shopping center houses. Its gargantuan capacity, part of its grandeur as one of the last remaining movie palaces, has become finally its albatross.

PERHAPS this is why its management is emphasizing the Fox's versatility. "We've been doing a lot of rock shows," says Deavours, "and almost every one of them has been sold out. We anticipated a lot of trouble with the kids — breaking doors in and lamp fixtures and artwork — but we've had no trouble at all. The kids love the Fox for its acoustics, you know. We had the Met here for 18 years, and the singers still would rather come here because of the decor and the acoustics. We've had a range here all the way from religious opera to rock shows to closed circuit television of auto races and prize fights. The Fox is very versatile. We can move in any direction."

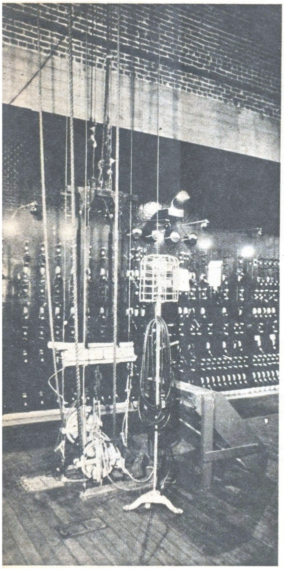
"It's a shame," Tommy Read said. "It's sure fallen from grace. To think that they would put rock groups in as opulent and fine a place as that." Tommy Read managed the Fox in its halcyon days, during the '40s. His staff numbered around 30 and included a corps of pin-neat ushers who adhered to a regimen as strict as West Point's.

"Back in those days the operation was fabulous, absolutely grand. Strictly deluxe. The public's interest at all times was foremost. Among the service staff, there was no slouching, no smoking and no talking.

"All of our employes were carefully screened, from head to foot," said Read, now an Atlanta concessionaire. "Every day before the ushers went on duty, we lined them up for inspection. We checked everything. We made sure they had fresh uniforms on. We checked their shoeshines, their fingernails, their hair, even their breath."

The ushers wore blue uniforms in summer and red in winter, always with white bat-wing standup collars and bow ties. Read, as manager, wore a morning suit in the morning and an evening suit in the evening. The man at the Mighty Moller was Slim Mathis — Read brought him down from Baltimore — but the name Slim did not fit the Fox, so Read dressed him up a bit in a new one, Don Mathis it was. "All the great stars of the era, we had them all there. C. B. DeMille and his entourage came once to open 'Buccaneer.' All the stars stayed across the street at the Georgian Terrace, which was quite a grand hotel at that time," Read said. "We had so many great events: war bond shows and specialty shows and ballets and musicals. Sammy Kaye and Kay Kyser, Benny and Hope. Hope was there several times."

THERE was also an official city censor, a little lady who had old aristocracy written all over her, who might tolerate one "hell" in a movie, but certainly not more than one. "There was none of this bedroom stuff, this blue stuff. We never showed a blue picture out there," Read said.



The mammoth panel has over 400 controls.

"It just wasn't necessary. After all," Read said, "you never heard Benny or Hope using profanity.

"The things they're showing in the Fox now . . ." he said. "But of course that's not my business anymore."

J. Noble Arnold, who managed the Fox from 1952 to 1970, now runs a laundromat near Buckhead. The most comfortable seats in his place are the molded plastic chairs topped off with hair-drying cranes, so that is where we sat. Arnold had a few mementos — a slick paper, coffee table size book about the last great movie houses and featuring the Fox, and a magazine article about himself — and a few memories. The washing machines hummed around. A handful of elderly

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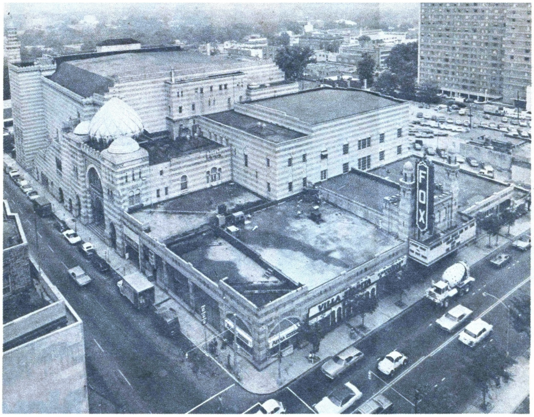
people folded their fresh laundry carefully on a formica table. “All the tripe in the Fox now . . . Oh God it’s really distressing,” Arnold said. “I can’t understand what happened to Hollywood. All this sex hang-up, these racial overtones. All you have to do is look at the movie page and it makes you sick.

“The Fox is the second largest theater in the United States, and there was a lot of pride involved in running it. We went 100 percent in every way. We never thought anything but first-run movies.

“It was always a great thrill when the Met came. It fit in so perfectly with the decor of the building. And the acoustics were perfect, too,” Arnold said. “When they were planning Kennedy Center in Washington, they sent a bunch of engineers down to visit the Fox and figure out why the acoustics were so good. There’s not a dead seat in the house.”



The Fox complex fills a city block with cream and buff brick, domes and minarets.

(Although six years have passed since the Met played in the Fox, old hands at the opera company drop by the Fox to roam about and reminisce during their annual week in Atlanta, Deavours said. And a dressing room door backstage still bears the word “libretto,” handwritten in chalk, remaining there through nostalgia or neglect.)

“They’ll never build them like the Fox again,” Arnold said. “Nowadays they throw up a little 500-seater in a shopping center, no decoration. All they need to run it is a cashier and a manager and a janitor, and usually the ticket taker sells concessions.

“The big temples of mirth — that’s what we called them — are gone now.”

Physically, time has been good to the Fox. Perhaps out of a sense of awe, the movie-goers have not defaced or stolen its furnishings over the decades. “It’s a rather amazing thing, but all the floor lamps and lighting fixtures are original equipment,” Deavours said. “Last year, before the Atlanta Film Festival was held here, there were about six or eight people, volunteers, sewing up the drapes and painting little scratches. Other theater people who visit here are constantly amazed at what good shape the Fox is in.”

BUT each passing year the Fox becomes more susceptible to destruction. It sits on precious land in a prime downtown area. Its overhead, compared to smaller theaters, is astronomical.

The Fox has been chosen by the Atlanta Civic Design Commission as one of the city’s most significant structures; that, of course, in no way insures its longevity. The Georgia Department of Natural Resources has applied to the U.S. Department of the Interior to place the Fox in a National Register of Historic Places. The nomination is expected to be accepted soon, and if it is, it will be very difficult for anyone to destroy the Fox in any project involving federal money, according to a state spokesman.

Joe Patten has felt which way the wind is blowing for the Fox, and he has taken a few quiet steps on his own. He and a friend, a local lawyer and amateur Fox historian,* have written up a proposal and passed it along to some “influential” people. Patten doesn’t want to reveal the contents of his proposal yet, but he is determined that the Fox will not be torn down.

“I have a friend named Charles Walker, who’s always going in the Fox and doing little things, painting and touching up,” Patten said. “Sometimes they pay him a little, sometimes they don’t. I guess I have about $3,000 or $4,000 tied up in equipment for the organ down there, but that doesn’t matter. We all do it for nothing. We just love that old place.” ☐

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*Robert L. Foreman, Jr.